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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the selective student recruitment and the admissions process implemented at the Department of Library and Information Science of Lund University, Sweden (BIVIL). The background is the profound changes in the library profession that have taken place during the past 10-15 years, with the development of information technology and the advent of the information society as the main driving forces. The results of the recruitment policy of BIVIL are favorable compared to results of a research project, Potential for Success, which includes a survey of desirable personality traits in new recruits as expressed by Swedish library managers. Survey results indicate that the employers' first choices are recruits who are dedicated, responsible, and able to work in teams. These are qualities strongly encouraged in the LIS students of BIVIL. (Contains 4 references.) (Author)

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Recruitment based on applied research: admission tests for new LIS students

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Abstract:

The paper presents the selective student recruitment and the admissions process implemented at the Department of Library and Information Science of Lund University, Sweden (known under the acronym BIVIL). The background is the profound changes in the library profession that have taken place during the past 10-15 years, with the IT development and the advent of the information society as the main driving forces. The results of the recruitment policy of BIVIL are favourable compared to results of a research project, Potential for Success, which includes a survey of desirable personality traits in new recruits as expressed by Swedish library managers. Survey results indicate that the employers' first choices are recruits who are dedicated, responsible, able to work in teams, dedicated. These are qualities strongly encouraged in the LIS students of BIVIL.

Background

The library profession has changed dramatically over the past 10-15 years. The IT development and the advent of the information society have been the main driving forces in this fundamental reorientation. Both form and content of Swedish library practice have been thoroughly revamped in the past decade. Old and new users crowd the libraries and put mounting pressure on the librarians, demanding increasingly more and better service. At the same time a massive generation shift is rapidly approaching as all the librarians of the baby-boom generation head for retirement. For the first time in many years Swedish libraries face noticeable recruitment problems.

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The development in Scandinavia is similar to that of North America and the United Kingdom. In all sectors our libraries now have a distinctive IT profile. The users increasingly demand faster and easier access to information, regardless of form and location. Naturally this means new demands on the professional skills of librarians. Above all, a library professional must be an expert in knowledge organisation and information transfer. This requires not only excellent IT skills but also high-level proficiencies in terms of information structuring and service development.

In Sweden the Library and Information Science programmes have changed fundamentally since the early nineties. The former vocational training approach has been abandoned. Completion of the LIS programme leads to a Master's degree called Master of Arts /Library and Information Science (MLIS). A Swedish Master's degree comprises 160 credits (the equivalent of 240 ECTS of the European Union).

The overall goal for the changes in Swedish Library and Information Science has been to create a competitive professional education for the library and information sectors meeting the new demands of the job market. The emphasis on a solid theoretical knowledge base has sprung from the need to foster flexible librarians who willingly and professionally embrace change. The level of ICT skills now required in libraries also place high demands on technological expertise in the "library schools" of today. The new librarians should in fact hold a wide range of traditional library competencies combined with proficiencies in a number of new areas, such as management, marketing, communications, and pedagogical know-how. With this background of rethinking and change in the approach to professional education it is essential to assess how well the Swedish LIS programmes match the requirements of the library and information job market.

In a research project, that is now near its conclusion, I have tried to identify what kind of people are needed in the information sector and what criteria are used in recruiting professional staff in Swedish libraries. The expectations of employers and job applicants should be reasonably synchronised if the professional education is properly tuned to the conditions of the information job market. Through our data we can evaluate how well the present LIS programmes are geared towards the needs of the Swedish library sector. Our research questions focus on what kind of personality characteristics Swedish library managers tend to look for in new recruits, and what personality factors distinguish Swedish LIS students.

I am greatly indebted to Dr. Anne Goulding of Loughborough University and her research team who, a few years ago, designed and carried out the British project ***Likely to Succeed***, on which ours is closely modelled.

My personal starting point

The recruitment issue was at the top of my list when I started planning the new LIS programme at Lund University. My own professional background of 20 years of academic librarianship has given me some firmly rooted opinions - one might say idiosyncrasies - about the qualities I like and don't like in a librarian. I knew what my ideal librarian should be like and as an educator I would actually have the opportunity to "create" such a person.

My ideal librarian is knowledgeable, socially gifted, intelligent, professional, service-minded, flexible, extrovert, communicative and able to cope with stress. This wide range of positive personal qualities is essentially preferable in all human beings. Naturally, such qualities may serve as selection criteria for almost any profession, but here we are talking about librarians. I use the word librarian in a wide sense, and have in mind an LIS professional in general, not just those who work in libraries. Not all librarians I have met over the years have demonstrated the qualities that I favour in an information professional.

The LIS profession, I think, is all about user service, or: dealing with people mainly on their own terms. It is essential, therefore, that a good librarian is highly sociable and good at communicating with all kinds of people. The librarian must also be flexible and widely knowledgeable, since each new customer may ask anything at all, something that may be the extreme opposite of what the person before was asking. The stress inherent in such a work situation should be a positive one for the librarian.

As already mentioned, the great changes that have taken place in libraries and information organisations over the past 10-20 years have fundamentally changed also the competencies considered necessary for librarians today. Such competencies may be defined on several levels, from overall professional skills to personal qualities. First of all and on a general level, excellent social skills are required in all kinds of professional situations. Being able to communicate well is absolutely vital for librarians.

On a strictly professional level many of the traditional library skills, such as reference work, classification, and information retrieval, are still required even though many of the tools for these activities keep changing. Librarians today also must have good knowledge of all sorts of new media, legal issues, financial management, and, naturally, ICT.

On an applied level the following personal competencies are necessary:

- Flexibility;
- Openness to society and full awareness of organizational and other relevant contexts;
- Preparedness for team work, including new working formats and team structures;
- Visionary imagination combined with realism;
- Sense of responsibility.

In order to achieve an outstanding library school, I realised that I must recruit students who are promising candidates for all those competencies and who will be able to develop the profession for the future. They must be hand picked. We select 42 students once a year, out of approximately 170 applicants. This means that we admit one out of four. Before they are admitted, our students have passed both an aptitude test and a personal interview.

BIVIL, the "library school" of Lund University

Almost ten years ago Lund University in Sweden launched a Masters' programme in Library and Information Science. This four-semester programme is now known under the (Swedish) acronym *BIVIL*. I was asked to set this programme up, and I'm still its leader and Head of the department. My goal was – is – to create a new kind of "Library school" of outstanding quality both academically and professionally. One of the most important steps towards this goal is attracting the right students, and you must have a clear notion of what you are looking for. In order to create your preferred student body it is necessary to implement highly selective admissions procedures. So far, we have been successful in recruiting highly motivated students with excellent academic abilities.

The first half of our Master's programme is constituted by 80 credits from individually selected subject areas. The second half of the Master's degree consists of 80 credits Library and Information Science. This means that the LIS programme constitutes the last portion of a student's academic education and that there is a prerequisite of 80 credits, or two years of full-time academic studies, before you can apply to BIVIL at the Department of Library and Information Science in Lund.

We use problem-based learning (PBL) as our pedagogical platform. Our students, in themselves, are looked upon as invaluable resources for our LIS programme. Between them they cover a wide range of subject knowledge from their earlier studies. Typically, 30 students bring with them subject knowledge of

55-60 academic subjects, ranging from Arabic to physics. In addition, our students possess all kinds of skills and a lot of informal knowledge. Our pedagogy, PBL, assumes that learning is strongly supported if it involves the learner's previous experience and knowledge. On this assumption, we try to make use of all the combined knowledge and experience of our student body throughout the programme. This creates a working climate that supports and reinforces learning and also makes clear for the students that they are looked upon as important and active players on the educational arena that involves both themselves and their fellow students. PBL also assumes that learning is facilitated by discussions and problem solving in groups, even though each student must take responsibility for her or his learning. We select socially skilled and communicative students in order to pave the way for the team-work that is the most prominent feature of our library school. The main purpose of traditional lectures is to support group studies and group learning, and the same applies to assessments. PBL also directly prepares the students for the job market. Swedish libraries and other knowledge organizations are characterized by team-work and horizontal organizations.

Hand-picking students for BIVIL and the profession

For a Master's programme in LIS it is not enough to foster competencies required by the profession, however. High demands on academic achievement also have to be met by our students. Library and Information Science is a multidisciplinary subject. Many different aspects must be covered at library school in order to prepare the new librarians for a wide range of professional activities. The pre-requisite of 80 credits, that all applicants must meet, guarantees that our students have good academic records.

After having put together both academic and professional requirements we identified a list of selection criteria and devised a process that could help us select the right students accordingly. The most important criteria that we apply throughout our admissions process in order to identify future favourite librarians are the following:

- Excellent communication skills,
- Willingness to provide service,
- Willingness to accept pressure,
- Ability to organize knowledge,
- Convincing motivation for the information profession,
- Convincing motivation for LIS studies.

The aptitude test

The applicants are assessed by those criteria first through a written aptitude test. This test also serves as a weeding mechanism. The test answers are evaluated by group of people who are not affiliated to our department and approximately 50% of the applicants achieve good enough test results to qualify for the next step of our admissions process, personal interviews.

The aptitude test was originally created and designed by two pedagogical researchers and myself. Throughout the eight years that we have been using it, the basic design of the test has remained intact. The actual questions or problems, however, have been reworded or superficially changed from time to time. The test covers four areas:

1. The librarian's work;
2. Text analysis;
3. Organization of information;
4. Ethics of service.

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The assignment relating to the first area assesses the students' motivation for and awareness of the range of tasks librarians carry out. The student's self-perception in relation to his or her choice of profession is also assessed. An answer that just says "I want to become a librarian because I love books" is not good enough.

The second assignment presents three or four brief texts that may reflect current library debate or relate to the role of libraries in various contexts. They provide the students with useful input in terms of "trade" knowledge of the library and information sector, both facts and values. This assignment demands that the students can communicate in writing the results of their analyses, putting the issues in proper contexts. – In order to make the test shorter we are considering to exclude this assignment.

Knowledge organization is one of the core areas of LIS. It takes logical thinking and creativity, a knack for holism and attention to detail to organize knowledge in ways that are relevant for its purpose and audience. The third assignment is designed to test this and it puts the students under pressure. The time frame for it is deliberately narrow, and most students find the assignment difficult and complicated. It requires you to organize information in hierarchical, content-related structures under certain restrictions. The information consists of alphabetical lists of names, products, etc. You have to be creative, be able to get an overview of the information and form alternative, tentative structures, and perform well under stress.

The fourth area, finally, presents an assignment where we evaluate the students' empathy, their understanding and application of general, professional ethics, and social skills. A realistic situation that involves a conflict between a library user on the one hand and the professional librarian on the other. The students must be able to identify the problems inherent in the situation and suggest plausible ways of action for both parties.

The personal interviews

Having come this far in the admissions process approximately half of the applicants remain as candidates for BIVIL. The function of the test as a stopping or weeding instrument is increasingly obvious the more applicants we get. The number of people interviewed correlates to the number of students we can admit, not to how many take the test. At present, we admit 42 students per year, and we interview 80-85 or approximately twice as many as we admit. After the interviews we meticulously rank the candidates. Ranking is difficult because so many candidates are good, and only half of the interviewees will be admitted.

Out of a team of four, two interviewers work together and each interview takes 30-45 minutes. I am part of the interviewing team, and so are one or two of my colleagues. The other team members are experienced librarians. Both interviewers take notes. Needless to say, the interviewees are usually quite nervous, and we think that the presence of a tape recorder would make things worse. The interviews are semi-structured and similar to job interviews. The candidates get some important information about our LIS programme, such as student workload, our use of problem-based learning, and assessment practices. Naturally, the candidates also have ample opportunity to ask their own questions about the programme.

Through the interviews we again assess the candidates' communication skills, motivation and ability to accept pressure. The interviews also reveal qualities like personal development and social skills. These are partly the same qualities that we assess through the test, but at the interviews we try to make an independent evaluation of each candidate. The interviewers have not seen the test answers that candidates have submitted.

The interviews are important to me as programme coordinator and lecturer, because they provide an opportunity for establishing a personal relationship to each interviewee. Even on the first day of library school I have individual mental pictures of many of the students. This is very valuable. However, it must also be emphasized that interviewing is a very powerful selection tool, but it is both time-consuming and costly. Both test and interviews are administered locally and the whole admissions process has to be completed within a very limited time-frame. It is a matter of less than two months from beginning to end, and i means that we must carry out up to 85 interviews in approximately three weeks.

Conclusions

Is it really worth it to put so much effort into admissions? My answer is unconditionally YES. Recruiting by means of carefully chosen and specified selection criteria means that you get the students you want. This carries an overwhelming importance for the design and implementation of our LIS programme. It also has long-ranging implications for the profile of the professional field in Sweden.

Once they are selected, I know that my students are determined and focussed on careers as librarians and information specialists. Secondly, being highly motivated means that they are willing to work hard and accept a heavy workload at library school. Thirdly, the students are communicative and socially talented to an extent that makes them excellent team workers. This is essential because we use problem-based learning and most student assessment is group based. Fourthly, the students are genuinely interested in the applications of Library and Information Science, which will be their future profession. Last but not least, the students' motivation is increased by the notion of being among the chosen. They have been selected for their qualities and this selection confirms that they are good enough.

The results of our research project about the personal characteristics of the librarian of tomorrow indicate that our selective student recruitment is the way to go. The LIS programme at Lund has a high profile in the Swedish library and information sector and is recognised for its excellence. There is a high degree of correspondence between the personal qualities we look for and encourage in our students at BIVIL and what the chief librarians respond in the survey. The Swedish library directors like to recruit people who are responsible, able to work with and for a range of colleagues, dedicated, and flexible. Our admissions process and our pedagogy emphasise dedication – we place high priority on strongly motivated students – and team-work. Some of the personal qualities library managers find lacking, such as ability to accept pressure and written communication skills, are vital parts of our aptitude test.

My overall conclusion is that student recruitment is vitally important for meeting the needs of the job market. A carefully deliberated set of selection criteria, adequate implementation methods and a relevant pedagogy is what it takes to give LIS students the new competencies required by library and information professionals today. The library schools must take responsibility for educating librarians in a way that provide them with the academic, professional and personal skills that the job market needs. At BIVIL, the Lund University library school, we endeavour to do this.

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